

Cast Into Harsh Glare, Students Find Grace

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Commentary

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As the academic year draws to a close, most college students have been juggling memories of spring break with the pressures of finishing final papers and preparing for exams. But students at Virginia Tech are stumbling over the shards of their shattered innocence as they cope with a tragic massacre that has left 33 members of their community dead.

While the nation reels from the aftermath of a shooting spree perpetuated by a clearly deranged student, it is tempting to talk about gun control, mental health, or the adage that "nothing is promised," not even long life to students who had dreams and enormous promise.

I am struck, though, by the enormous poise, grace and self-possession that the young people in the Virginia Tech community have displayed as they have shared their stories with the world. Many elders could learn from the way these young people have handled tragedy, as they have patiently answered the most inane of media questions and gallantly embraced their friends. They have behaved with such amazing grace that we must remind ourselves that these are young people, straddling youth and adulthood, growing and learning even in the face of unspeakable horrors.

College students are doing lots of teaching by example these days. The young women of the Rutgers University basketball team, propelled to headlines by the coarse remarks of shock jock Don Imus, were a model of grace and dignity amid a harsh and hateful atmosphere. As their elders shrilly called for firings and explanations, the Scarlet Knights simply explained who they were -- scholar-athletes who should have made headlines for their performance in the NCAA Final Four, not for the insults of a provocateur.

The three former Duke University lacrosse players now declared innocent of kidnapping, assault and rape charges also used their moment in the headlines to transmit an image of dignity and maturity. The trio were among a group of young men that hired exotic dancers, used racial slurs and brandished a broomstick at the women -- heroes, they are not. But when unjustly subjected to a rogue prosecution and the ensuing media limelight, they handled themselves well.

When college students lose their innocence in public, it is important for us to remember the way that their youth compounds the circumstances that catapult them into headlines. As we all mourn the deaths at Virginia Tech, cringe at Imus' crass insult of the Scarlet Knights, and raise questions about matters of justice in the Duke case, we must also appreciate the young people who at moments of great adversity are leading us all by example.

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